DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 374 930 RC 019 767

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TITLE Fairy Floss, Ferris Wheels, Football?: Constructions of Meaning through the Recreational Activities of Children in the Showmen's Guild of Australasia.
INSTITUTION University of Central Queensland (Australia). Faculty of Education.
PUB DATE Sep 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual National Conference of the Australian Anthropological Society (Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, September 29-October 1, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Attitudes; Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Leisure Time; *Migrant Children; Migrant Education; Migrants; *Recreation; *Recreational Activities; *Semantics; Semiotics; Team Sports; Work Attitudes; Work Ethic
IDENTIFIERS *Showmens Guild (Australasia)

ABSTRACT

This study examines the elements of "work and play" as they are conceptualized by the children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia. Recreation and work are semantically distinct, but this distinction can be blurred in particular contexts and according to differing individual perceptions. As part of a study evaluating a distance education program, interviews conducted with parents, children, home tutors, and itinerant teachers included a series of questions about work and play. It was found that many of the families participated in outdoor recreation such as boating and camping. However, the mobile lifestyle of the children prevented them from belonging to a team, attending training sessions, playing regular sports, and developing skills in a controlled form. Instead their participation was limited to sport and play in an informal and semistructured manner at school (for example, lunch breaks and physical education classes) and on the show grounds. The children's lifestyle also contributed to their view of work. For most children, show day represents a day of fun, but for show children it is a day of work. They attend school and after school they return to the show ground to work alongside their parents until late evening. Almost all show children had work aspirations beyond the Guild, but knew that a working life in the show was available to them. (LP)

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# FAIRY FLOSS, FERRIS WHEELS, FOOTBALL?: CONSTRUCTIONS OF MEANING THROUGH THE RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN IN THE SHOWMEN'S GUILD OF AUSTRALASIA

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**Paper presented at the annual national conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, University of Melbourne, 29 September-1 October 1993.**

RC 019767

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# FAIRY FLOSS, FERRIS WHEELS, FOOTBALL?: CONSTRUCTIONS OF MEANING THROUGH THE RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN IN THE SHOWMEN'S GUILD OF AUSTRALASIA

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For most Australians, "show day" comes once a year - like Easter, The Queen's Birthday, Christmas Day, and other public holidays. For the children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia, "show day" - as expressed in terms of riding dodgem cars, consuming the contents of show bags, and watching horse and cattle parades - takes place all year round.

Certainly the show children experience rides, show bags, and parades, but for many of them these represent work rather than play. For many show children, recreation consists of a range of other pursuits, such as playing sport and collecting objects.

This reversal of situations provides a context for analysing elements of the results of an on-going study of an educational program designed by the Queensland School of Distance Education for the children of the Showmen's Guild. Semi-structured interviews with children, parents, home tutors, and itinerant teachers included a series of questions about conceptions of work and play. Responses to these questions are used to suggest several meanings constructed by the children through their recreational activities. Implications for the links between meaning, recreation, and work in Australian society are also considered.

# FAIRY FLOSS, FERRIS WHEELS, FOOTBALL?: CONSTRUCTIONS OF MEANING THROUGH THE RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF CHILDREN IN THE SHOWMEN'S GUILD OF AUSTRALASIA[1]

## INTRODUCTION

Conceptualising the other is one process whereby individuals and groups define their own identities. A variation on this process is the use of opposed categories to construct meanings out of people's daily lives. One such paired category is "work and play": the recreational activities of a group have much to say about the kind of work that is engaged in and valued by the group, while the type of work helps to determine the nature of recreation in which the workers are able to indulge.

For most Australians, "show day" comes once a year, like a host of other public holidays. They use the occasion to catch up on lawn mowing and other jobs around the home, to meet a deadline at work, or to take their families to the show. For those who actually go to the show, there is the novelty, expense, and enjoyment of riding ferris wheels and dodgem cars, eating hot dogs and fairy floss, and looking at displays of bottled fruit and equestrian events.

For the children of the Showmen's Guild of Australasia, "show day" - as expressed in terms of riding dodgem cars, consuming the contents of show bags, and watching grand parades - takes place all year round. Certainly they experience the rides, show bags, and parades, but for many of them these represent work rather than play. For many show children, recreation consists of a range of other pursuits, such as playing

[1]The writers are grateful to the following groups and individuals for their assistance in writing this paper: the parents, children, and home tutors of the Showmen's Guild for agreeing to be interviewed; the staff of the Queensland School of Distance Education for their willing co-operation; the other members of the Professional Growth Research and Teaching Group for their support and encouragement in the project; Mr Geoffrey Danaher (who also commented on the text of sections of the paper), Ms Bonita Frank, and Ms Pam Gale for transcribing the interviews; and the Faculty of Education at the University of Central Queensland for assisting with travel costs. The writers acknowledge helpful comments by members of the Faculty of Education following an earlier presentation of elements of this paper at a staff seminar on 16 September 1993. The project was funded by a University of Central Queensland Research Grant (ER/U/399). The writers accept responsibility for the views expressed in the paper.

sports like football and collecting things such as flowers.

This reversal of situations provides a context for analysing elements of the "work and play" paired category as it is conceptualised by the children of the Showmen's Guild. As part of an on-going study of an educational program designed by the Queensland School of Distance Education for these children, semi-structured interviews with children, parents, home tutors, and itinerant teachers included a series of questions about conceptions of work and play. Responses to these questions are used to suggest several meanings constructed by the children through their recreational activities. Implications for the links between meaning, recreation, and work in Australian society are also considered.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

What are the meanings of "meaning" that inform this paper? A starting point can be found in Birch's (1993) insistence that no meanings are fixed or stable. He refers to the many levels of meaning and the various forms of ideology evident in social practices that make up "the social and institutional transactions and interactions of people doing communication". According to Birch, "Ways of making sense do not exist outside of the discourse which creates them."

This understanding is considerably enhanced by Schirato's (in press) invaluable review of semiotic conceptions of meaning. His adaptation of a definition by Charles Morris (cited in Innes, 1985, pp. 183-184) is a useful synthesis:

> The meaning of a sign is both its signification and its interpretant, on the one hand, and the contexts producing, defining, constraining, and evaluating the negotiating of that relationship, on the other. (p. 11)

This implies that, in analysing the meaning of a particular communication act, the analyser needs to focus on the words that are used and what they appear to suggest to the people who hear or read them. At the same time, attention needs to be given to the various contexts and codes in which the communication act takes place. Thus, meanings are neither "natural" nor "neutral", but rather are the sites of ideological conflict whereby particular discourses are privileged and others are marginalised.

While the larger study of which this paper forms a part was conducted mainly within an interpretive paradigm, Schirato (in press, p. 5) points out that "the main difference separating semiotic and phenomenological theories of culture, language, and meaning" is the latter's propensity to regard meaning as existing outside language. For the purposes of this paper, we accept that the meanings we discern in the data presented here are mediated through the language used by participants in the research.

Of the four postmodernist developments in understanding meaning cited by Schirato (in press, p. 8) - Derridean deconstruction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, theories of feminism and gender, and Baudrillard's notion of simulation - at this stage we are most interested in Derrida's version of deconstruction. Derrida's insight that the binary logic underpinning structuralism can be reversed, so that "up" can be read as "not down", and his inference that signifiers and their meanings are capable of sliding across one another, suggest a potentially fruitful means of interpreting notions of "work and play". In other words, the same activities connected with the show circuit are "play" to some people and "work" to others, depending on the contexts in which they are discussed and the discourses that shape their interpretation.

Another possibly helpful viewpoint derives from Foucault's (1980) historicisation of the tendency of the body to be a site where meanings can be sought and identified (as for example in the scientification of the disciplined body at the centre of football). His interest in the fetishising of meaning as knowledge, and in its relation to the operation of power, is also suggestive, particularly his concern with the links among institutions, discourses, and the production of meaning on the one hand and the regulation of groups and practices on the other (Schirato, in press, p. 10).

Foucault writes extensively about the exercise of power on the individual. He describes it as having a "capillary" nature, in that it operates through everyday myriad social practices, to the extent that power is everywhere and in everyone. Foucault contends that the critical effect of modern power to constitute people as subjects and then to objectivise them is the central theme of his work. This objectivisation of the subject is exemplified in the biophysical divisions between scientification and the

pleasure of the body.

According to Foucault, power and freedom are interrelated, and both are necessary for a viable concept of leisure. A variation on this view is presented by Rojek (1986; cited in Rowe & Lawrence, 1990, p. 162), for whom the study of leisure is the study of power rather than that of freedom. Rojek states that "leisure gives the illusion of coherence and self-determination in a world where coherence and self-determination are objectively denied" . Furthermore:

> The essence of recreation is freedom of choice to engage in any activity or passive experience which satisfies basic social, psychological, or physiological needs which are not met in other activities of life.

The only item of consensus among recreation theorists is their agreement that recreation is a difficult concept to define. The word "recreation" stems from the Latin *recreatio*, "restoration to health". Most theories embrace a number of interrelated elements, such as restoration, activity, choice, societal values, and outcomes. A widespread view also appears to exist that recreation is the antithesis of work. Many of these elements are encapsulated in Brown's (1985, p. 1) definition of recreation:

> ...those activities or inactivities which are freely entered into by an individual during leisure time and which bring satisfying and enjoyable experiences...Leisure time is the discretionary time available to the individual after completion of obligatory activities and which can be used as he or she chooses.

Constructing a "working synthesis" of these very disparate elements[2], we have identified the key components of the theoretical framework underpinning our analysis of the data reported here. Thus, meanings are *derivative* (from acts of communication), *negotiated* (through language), *contextualised* (within particular discourses and institutions), *politicised* (in privileging some discourses and marginalising others), and *fetishised* (in the form of taken for granted knowledge).

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[2]We acknowledge that there are many understandings of meaning that could have been used in this paper. For example, Cohen (1985, pp. 71-75) presents an interesting discussion of symbolism as the expression of meaning, and of the links between structure and symbolism in the construction of community. Crick (1987) provides a useful overview of anthropological approaches to the study of meaning.

Recreation is connected with notions of freedom of choice and the exercise of power. As well, recreation and work can be seen as semantically distinct, but at the same time this distinction can be blurred in particular contexts and/or according to differing individual perceptions. It remains to apply this framework to interpreting the recreational activities of the Showmen's Guild children.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION[3]

There are several circuits or "runs" throughout Australia connected by the annual agricultural shows. Various groups are involved in organising these shows. In addition to the local committees, these groups include members of the Showmen's Guild ("the showies"), "the itinerants", "the horsy people", and "the workers". Although distinctions among groups are clear to show people, interaction is strong and membership sometimes overlaps. Whereas previously members had to be born into the Guild, now people can apply for election if they have completed at least three years working on local shows. The extent to which this has resulted in the introduction of large amounts of "new blood" remains to be established.

In 1989, largely in response to active lobbying by members of the Guild, the Queensland Department of Education began a program for children involved with the show circuit. Teachers from the Queensland School of Distance Education in Brisbane oversee the children's completion of correspondence lessons, which are supplemented by various technological aids. The teachers travel to several shows in Queensland, and work directly with the children in local schools. Some parents employ home tutors to assist their children when the teachers are not in attendance.

The research project examining aspects of this unique learning situation is on-going, and now has been conducted over two consecutive years. In 1992 the study was of a general nature, designed to develop awareness, while in 1993 the following four themes were chosen for investigation: curriculum, social networks, participant roles, and work and play. The theoretical framework for the study has been qualitative, with

[3]Elements of this section of the paper have been taken from Danaher (1993).

the data being interpreted with the assistance of the *Hyperqual* computer package.

In both years of the study, student involvement was determined by the teachers and the parent helpers who were at the schools on the days of the interviews. The majority of parents and children interviewed in 1992 were interviewed again in 1993, as the same families maintain an annual business commitment to the coastal show circuit. The research is informed by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in that the 1992 study was one of discovering the world as seen through the eyes of the participants, and also the basic social processes that organise that world (Hutchinson, 1990, p. 124). The second year of the study attempted to understand, among other things, the social processes and structures of work and play as revealed by the lives of the show children. A total of eighty-three interviews have been conducted in two provincial cities.

**SELECTED FINDINGS**

This section of the paper presents the results of an examination of those interview transcripts. The various ways in which respondents referred to "work" and "recreation" or "play" were interrogated, with a view to interpreting various meanings reflected in the recreational activities of show people.

One such meaning of recreation to which "showies" can relate is outdoor recreation, by which we mean recreation that takes place in the natural outdoors. This is a commonly reported pursuit by many "showies". Many families, for example, tow fishing boats on the "northern run", while others talk of camping in inland locations.

This participation in outdoor recreation may be due to the show people's mobility: they are admirably "set up" to enjoy long periods of relative comfort in an outdoor setting. The reverse of this situation is that frequently moving their home base prevents their participation in certain forms of what we would consider to be regular recreation, such as playing team games.

> Well, there is something to be said for it. Three months in winter through the north coast of Queensland. I mean, you can confine yourself and barely leave the showgrounds, but you've got to make the

> opportunity, because your time is pretty well taken up. But let's face it, you can wash and iron every day so, when you've got a bit of time to take off...We always had a lot of beach involvement because that's another occupational perk, I suppose. You generally spend about ten or twelve weeks over the Christmas period on a rather nice beach location...And you're working, yes. But, even though you are working, you tend to take that as a holiday. I mean, you might be working but only doing night time work...And you take advantage of the things that people pay their money to go to that particular holiday location and do.

Because of their itinerancy, the children are unable to formalise sport and play in the traditional sense - belonging to a team, attending training sessions, playing regular fixtures, and developing skills in a controlled form. They participate in sport and play in an informal and semi-structured manner through school (for example, lunch breaks, and physical education classes). Indeed, for most of the show children, this is a primary motivation to go to a "regular" school.

> Our kids, if they don't go away to school, miss out [sport] more than anything. Because they love the sports bit too...It's great in the holidays, because you get all the kids who've been away to school come back and they make up a team. But for the most part, I'm not sure if it was last year or the year before, but the kids who were still on the grounds tried to get a football team together, and they had them six year olds to fifteen year olds. And I mean that's just not on, it's not fair to the little kids and it's not fair to the big kids, because they can't do their thing because they've got to be gentle with the little ones. And I mean there's jut not enough numbers to make it up.

Play on the showground follows more of the same. Children consistently reported that their play involved impromptu activities and unorganised team games such as cricket, football, and netball. These teams consisted of irregular numbers, sizes, and ages.

> Oh, we play a lot of different things and usually...we go out and find cubby houses or we build some...all the teenagers and older kids...[are] like little kids. And they usually go out and they find cubby houses. They play football or something. A lot of the girls are really like the boys, because they like playing football and soccer and all that kind of boys stuff.

Gender is yet another illustration of Foucauldian notions of power and the patriarchal structure of the Showmen's Guild. The disempowerment of women was consistently

reflected in comments relating to sport and recreation. The following remarks were made by girls.

> Well, not the girls. They usually muck around on the monkey bars. But boys, they play football all the time.
>
> Well, most schools have cricket - our school has cricket and T-ball.
>
> When Cathy's there we usually play sport, but sometimes we see, we've got a football team, they're boys on the showground.

These comments from children of such tender years suggest that the notion of the body can conform to Foucault's duality of bodily function: that is, that the female body is to be protected in order to propagate future generations, while the scientification of the male body is finely tuned and conditioned for performance in the capitalist society through participation in games and sport.

The influence of the media appears a critical factor in developing perceptions of recreation. Sport was consistently equated with recreation, and in our case study participants reported those sports that received the greatest media exposure. The Showmen's Guild even ritualise their own "One Dayers" and "State of Origin" cricket and football matches, with showmen of New South Welsh origins facing up against Queensland showmen (apparently the contests are fought with a ferocity equal to the real events). One presumes that Victorian showmen look on from the wings, watching with incredulity this form of "cross country wrestling"!

> They love it, because let's face it, everything's sort of shoved down your neck: State of Origin football, football, football. And of course they're going to want to do that too.

Showmen's notions of work are also a context to use Foucauldian concepts of power and discourse. To most people, show day projects a meaning of frivolity and relaxation - a recreational experience. For the children of the show, however, the meaning of show day is the absolute antithesis of relaxation, as the day is one of work. Not only do they attend school while the town children are having a holiday, but after school they return to the showground to work alongside their parents until late evening. Almost all the children are involved in some aspect of the family business. Work commitments vary from setting up "joints", to working the ticket office,

to relieving itinerant staff, to being responsible for household chores in the family caravan. This involvement begins at a tender age.

> It's a hard life and they do do work on the off days, setting up and travelling and what not.

Children consistently talked about relieving workers on family "joints" each day, and also reported being paid handsomely for their efforts.

> They do get involved in their parents' businesses. They are expected to participate. I wouldn't be sure of the rewards they are given for it, but we have a couple of boys who have got their own joints, small joints, but they do participate in the running of those.

Many show children talked about the world in what some might regard as a dysfunctional way. A Year Six pupil answered the question "Do many go off the show?":

> Once they get older and they get some work, go back to a normal life...but once you get older it [the show]'s not always fun.

Almost al the show children have aspirations beyond the showground, some more realistic than others. However, all were able to talk about work and work aspirations outside the show, secure in the knowledge that a working life in the show was always available to them. An interviewed father volunteered:

> I wanted to be a commercial pilot but I'm two per cent colour blind so I failed the test, which does not matter now. Basically it was, because it's a traditional business sent down from family to family and if you're keen and want to work, it's quite a good business.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR MEANING, RECREATION, AND WORK IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

What are some of the implications for this study of more general relations between meaning, recreation, and work in Australian society? There is a definite similarity in the roles played by children and their commitment to the family business between the children of the Showmen's Guild and the children involved in family businesses such as pinball parlours, squash courts, and bowling alleys. For a whole range of groups in Australian society, the meanings of recreation and work are intermeshed in ways that

at first glance appear surprising in a differentiated society such as Australia. Other similarities derive from the observation that multi-age games teams and girls playing boys' games are common in particular localities, such as one teacher schools and closely knit neighbourhoods.

As well as these similarities, there is a uniqueness in the meanings of recreation and work for this group of show children. This uniqueness lies in the mobility of the group's members. What can be exciting to urban children (like camping and engaging in recreational pursuits such as fishing in different locations) is "normal" for the show children. Another feature of this uniqueness is their lack of access to the extended sporting opportunities available to people who live permanently in non-mobile communities. These opportunities include playing consistently over a long period, playing with people of the same age, and playing at different levels of competition. They also miss the development of interpersonal skills through team participation.

Finally, the relationships in a small-scale community - the backyard of the town showgrounds - give structure to this group of children and provide a framework for their recreation. That is not unlike the structure and framework of the alternative music subcultures that Rebecca Zuesse (1993) discusses. As with those subcultures, leisure for the Showmen's Guild children implies work, and the patterns of this work resist analysis within a "nine to five, Monday to Friday" time frame.

## CONCLUSION

Show day comes once a year for every Australian child except those on the show circuit. The show children do not experience show day, in the sense of show day being a public holiday, and the chance to take time off from work. The show children do experience weekly show days in every semester of their itinerant schooling, in the sense of show day being school and work rather than recreation. The meanings that the show children attach to and reflect in their recreational and work activities are intermeshed. They are also derivative, negotiated, contextualised, politicised, and fetishised. In this way, fairy floss, ferris wheels, and football (like the lifestyles of the show children themselves) are mobile and changeable, rather than stationary and fixed (Birch, 1993).

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